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ABSTRACT

This kit provides a summary of a scholarly paper, discussion questions, and activities to promote constructive debate between scholars and ethnic groups about the role of women in working class ethnic communities. The paper identifies these women as descendants of immigrant women who still live in large industrial centers of the East and Midwest. Although they are regarded as "traditional" and "passive," their role in history shows that they were instrumental in supplementing or providing the only family income and in keeping their families and social organizations strong and active. The feminist movement does not include them, but social changes occurring at the present time are harming their personal identity and self-concept. Their husbands are threatened because some wives must work fulltime to help meet the cost of living. They are aggressively active about socioeconomic concerns. Questions relevant to the lives of these women include the effect of the Equal Rights Amendment and the diluting effect on ethnicity from participation in the permanent job force. One of the six related activities involves comparing marriage expectations of ethnic women when they were age 20 to what they expect today. (AV)

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WOMEN IN WORKING CLASS ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

"CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES KIT" No. 2

Based on an essay by Kathleen McCourt
National Opinion Research Center
and Loyola University

Kit developed by C. Frederick Risinger
Indiana University, Bloomington

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Issued as part of the Project, "Bridge-Building Between Scholars and Chicago's Ethnic and Minority Communities." Supported by a grant from the American Issues Forum Chicago, a program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Ronald Grossman
Project Director

INTRODUCTION

These "Controversial Issues Kits" were produced by the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity for a project entitled BRIDGE-BUILDING BETWEEN SCHOLARS AND CHICAGO'S ETHNIC AND MINORITY COMMUNITIES. The project was made possible by a grant from the American Issues Forum Chicago, a program developed for the nation's Bicentennial under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities and with the co-sponsorship of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration.

When the American Issues Forum announced its mandate to bring Americans together to "discuss issues that excite debate among us," the Institute could think of no two parties who were more in need of a constructive debate than scholars, and ethnic and minority groups. On the one hand there is a tendency among scholars and other professionals to regard ethnic, minority and neighborhood groups not as rich resources for solving human problems, but as problems in themselves. On the other hand, ethnic, minority, and women's groups and neighborhood organizations are all becoming increasingly vocal in demanding that "elite professionals" including scholars and others who design and administer educational, mental care and neighborhood services respond within the cultural norms of the group.

Clearly what is needed is a new partnership built around a pluralist ethic that respects both professional training and expertise, and the everyday experience and common sense of people.

To accomplish this goal, the Institute convened a seminar of Chicago-based scholars with an interest in contemporary urban problems. Several scholars were commissioned to author papers on various public policy issues suggested by the American Issues Forum nine-month calendar, and known to be of concern to the ethnic and minority groups that work with the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity. A preliminary draft of the papers was shared with leaders of community groups, who then invited several scholars to attend their regular business meetings and to debate the issues in the papers with their members. The insights gleaned from these discussions were incorporated into a revised version of the papers which then became the basis for the "Controversial Issues Kits."

The Kits include a summary of the scholarly papers as modified by the experience of sharing them with the community groups, a series of discussion questions raised by the issues in the paper, suggested group activities, and a guide for running discussions.

It is the Institute's hope that these "Kits" will generate an even wider circle of debate among us, since they contain both the expertise of the scholars and the everyday experience of community groups. It is also hoped that this project will serve as a model for a new approach to cooperation between scholars and community groups, one that allows each to play more fulfilling roles in relation to the other.

The Kit, "Women in Working Class Ethnic Communities," originated in a paper by Dr. Kathleen McCourt of the National Opinion Research Center and Loyola University; the Kit, "Group Identity, Multiethnicity and Cultural Variations in Education," originated in a paper by Dr. Isidro Lucas of the University of Chicago; the Kit, "The Neighborhood and American Society," originated in a paper by Professors Ronald Grossman of Lake Forest College, and Len Calabrese of Northwestern University. The Kits themselves are the work of C. Frederick Risinger, Coordinator for School Social Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. Secretarial and editorial assistance were provided by Patricia Ann Eckman and Lynn Marie Klocek.

The Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity grew out of the American Jewish Committee's pioneering National Project on Ethnic America. Established in 1968 to develop public policy approaches to issues which bridge differences between groups, the Project has been recognized for deepening the public's understanding of the legitimate needs and concerns of ethnic and working-class populations. As the Project grew into the Institute in 1974, its initial focus on ethnicity was broadened to include a consideration of how ethnicity is modified by other identity factors such as class, sex, religion, and region. The Institute works through local and national networks of the social service professions, the educational community, neighborhood groups, the government, and ethnic, minority, feminist and intergroup relations agencies.

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WOMEN IN WORKING CLASS ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

News Headline:
"CROSSTOWN EXPRESSWAY APPEARS DOOMED: DALEY FORCES SUFFER DEFEAT"

The final outcome of the proposed Crosstown Expressway in Chicago will not be known for some time. Yet the nation's most powerful political machine has been stymied for several years in its efforts to build the highway. Dozens of groups and thousands of individuals have been involved on both sides of the controversy, but of all the opponents, some of the most significant have been the women of the working class ethnic communities who maintain that their neighborhoods and their homes will be destroyed if the Crosstown is built. These women are usually considered among the least powerful and most apathetic elements in American society. One reason for this prevailing attitude is that few studies have ever been made about the role of working class ethnic women outside the family. Indeed, there is even wide disagreement about the definition of who these women are. Yet, the Crosstown Expressway issue is only one example of the growing emergence of both the interest and "clout" of the women in urban America's blue collar, ethnic neighborhoods. This paper will help identify just who these women are, dispel some of the myths about their powerlessness in American society, and raise questions concerning the role of working class women in America's future.

There are more than 40 million working class women in America today. One scholar called them "the subordinate partner(s) in...subordinate famil(ies). In other words, they are the wives and mothers in one of the least powerful groups in America. Traditionally, they have been considered subservient to their already subservient men. In short, they are the kind of Americans who can be (and have been) ignored by historians, businesses, and government. However, this image may not have been accurate...and it is one that is certainly changing.

Who are the working class ethnic women? Generally, they are the daughters and granddaughters of immigrant women who still live in the large industrial centers of the east and midwest. Most still live in ethnic neighborhoods, although growing numbers are moving to the suburbs. They represent the generation that was able to move out of the apartment house and buy their own home. They struggle and hope so that their children can become teachers, accountants, or even lawyers and doctors. They are good citizens who obey the law; good wives who stand by their husbands; good mothers who want their children to accept their values; and good workers who make low wages and cause little trouble.

During the 1960's and 1970's, when Blacks, young people, and women of the middle class were demanding and receiving concessions designed to increase their political and economic power, working class ethnic women were left out. Generally, they have been regarded by scholars and the public as the most traditional group in contemporary American society. They adhere to ethnic customs, still go to church, support a male-dominated culture, and believe their primary societal role is to be "good wives and mothers."

In addition to this "traditionalism," the common view of working class women is that they are "psychologically passive." They accept things as they are and have little faith in their own abilities to effect change outside their homes. Any events outside the neighborhood are not only difficult to understand, but they are also threatening to her and her family.

This is the common image of the working class woman--traditional and passive. However, this image may only be half right. Working class ethnic women do support the traditional values of their ethnic background...more so than their men. But an analysis of their role in history conflicts with the passive half of the image. Since history is nearly always written by men about men, much of the evidence has been only partially collected and analyzed. Yet, the growing interest in women's history is rapidly altering our view of working class ethnic women.

Immigrant women could not be passive in the 1800's and nearly 1900's; the family would not have survived. As one woman historian reveals, "they peddled from push-carts, ran groceries, sold fancy goods, took in boarders, /and/ cooked for men without families. Immigrant women also worked in the factories." Then, as now, most working women thought it would be temporary..until the husband was well enough to go back...until they saved enough for the downpayment on a house. Of course, this "temporariness" prevented any sort of wide scale labor organization movement. But working women were not passive. In 1909, 20,000 of them struck and forced the origin of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In 1902, women led mass demonstrations against high meat prices in New York.

Even inside the home, the "passive" image appears to be incorrect. The immigrant woman was strong--and she had to be actively strong--to keep the family together, to preserve ethnic traditions, to support the church, parish or synagogue in its efforts to provide social services for the neighborhood. Yes, the "traditional" side of the image is accurate. But in defending their traditions against assimilation into the "melting pot," working class ethnic women were aggressively active.

Today's working class ethnic women have just as many (maybe more) problems as their immigrant grandmothers. Not only problems of family survival, housing, and schools, but new dilemmas of personal identity and self concept. Traditional role expectations are breaking down...depriving many working class ethnic women of the firm base from which they served the family and achieved self-fulfillment. Increased instances of alcoholism, depression, and divorce among working class women provide evidence that traditional roles may have been more comfortable and appealing than new life style. Additionally, the changing situation of the employed working class women has heightened tensions within the family. No longer is a job considered temporary. Either because of inflation, a desire to achieve individual worth, or a combination of these and other factors, working class ethnic women are becoming permanent members of the work force. Many blue collar men are threatened by their working wives. They feel stripped of their dignity and manhood. According to recent statistics, one out of every five blue collar jobs is held by a woman. There is growing evidence that women are demanding (and receiving) more power in the labor movement and in the national economic picture. This will cause further changes--not only in their lifestyles, but in their attitudes toward, and defense of, traditional values.

What about the feminist movement and the working class ethnic woman? For the most part, working class ethnic women have not been represented in the movement. To many working class women, the ideas espoused by the feminists--abortion, sexual freedom, attacks on the housewife's role--are attacks on their most cherished values. But this does not mean that working class women are not concerend--that they will not organize and fight for what they believe is right. The Crosstown fight is an example of their emerging power. So is the attack on the practice of "redlining" neighborhoods by banks and savings and loan associations. Working class ethnic women want to have a greater measure of control over their own neighborhoods and lives.

They are more angry with being denied a home improvement loan from a bank (because of redlining) than being refused a Master Charge card issued in their own names. In other words, they are still more concerned with socio-economic issues than with sex issues.

The working class woman wants a number of things. She wants to conserve her family and her neighborhood. She wants job security for her husband and some provisions for a worry-free retirement--both for her parents and her own family. She wants the right to choose whether to work or stay at home. And finally, she wants to recapture the sense of positive group identity and heritage of her mother and grandmothers. Working class ethnic women know they are Americans--now they would like to know more about the struggles that working class women went through two and three generations ago. When they do, it is likely that the "passive" part of their image will be dispelled.

WOMEN IN WORKING CLASS ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

-DISCUSSION QUESTIONS-

1. What is the general definition of "working class ethnic women," according to the paper that you just read?

2. The paper established several distinctions between working class ethnic women and those women of the middle class who are leaders of the feminist movement. What were some of these distinctions? Do you agree that there is a socio-economic and life style difference between the two groups?

3. The general impression of working class women has been that they are both "traditional" and "psychologically passive." What is meant by these two descriptions? Do you agree with the paper's argument that while working class women were (and are) traditional, they were (and are) not passive?

4. In what ways have the feminist movement and changing roles for women added to the social and personal difficulties of working class women? In what ways does the feminist movement provide opportunities for them?

5. The paper makes a strong point that working class women are more concerned about local issues, while the middle class leaders of the feminist movement are more interested in national reforms such as ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment. Do you agree with this assessment? Can you offer evidence from personal experience or the news media to support your position?

6. Some people have argued that the traditionalism of working class ethnic women is found in all women who remain in the home as homemakers. They maintain that it is not economic class or ethnic background that encourages traditionalism; instead, it is the lack of interaction with people and ideas outside the family and neighborhood. If this is so, then the traditionalism of working class ethnic women is not related to ethnicity or economic class--it is related to their function as women who stay at home. Which view seems most accurate to you?

7. The opposition to the Crosstown Expressway and the practice of "redlining" in Chicago has pushed many working class ethnic women into community leadership positions. The same has been true in similar controversies throughout the nation. Does this signify a growing involvement of working class ethnic women, or is it simply an indication that all people are using the protest techniques that were used by civil rights and anti-war groups?

8. If the paper is correct about working class ethnic women being the staunchest defenders of their ethnic heritage and customs, what might be the consequences of the growing involvement of these women in the permanent job force and in community and work action groups? Could this lead to a further decline in ethnicity?

9. One of the arguments against the Equal Rights Amendment is that it will encourage women to find full-time jobs--otherwise they will not feel "fulfilled." According to these people, this will result in a loosening of family ties, lead to more government involvement in childrearing, and hasten the breakdown of the American family. How do you feel about this argument?

WOMEN IN WORKING CLASS ETHNIC COMMUNITIES
-ACTIVITIES-

1. Divide the group into sub-groups comprised of four to six participants. Give each sub-group a sheet of poster paper or a large sheet of butcher paper. (You need paper this big because the sheets will have to be posted along the wall.) Have each group draw a line down the middle and title the two sections "How Working Class Women Are Different From Other Women" and "How Working Class Women Are Like Other Women." Each sub-group should discuss and write in as many differences and similarities as they can. The paper "Women in Working Class Communities" should be one base for the discussions, but the participants should feel free to bring in other information and attitudes. Then bring the total group together, post the sheets on the wall with masking tape and have each group report and elaborate on their sheets. Make a note of common items among the reports and save this summary report.

2. This activity is related to the previous one. By the time your group meets again, you should have prepared a "handout" with the "most agreed-on" items from the last activity. Divide into sub-groups again (preferably different ones) and try to use the distinctions between working class women and other women as "strong points." not deficiencies or weaknesses. For example, if one perceived difference was that working class ethnic women are "more traditional," the sub-group could recommend using working class women as the organizers of more traditional groups. The sub-groups should report back to the total group again. Hopefully, these two activities might "spur" some sort of follow-up action.

3. Each woman in the group (men, too, if they're present) should be given two sheets of paper. They should write two sets of marriage "rights and responsibilities" -- in other words, two marriage contracts. The first should be the one that the women more or less "expected" when they were first married (or at age 18-20 if never married). The second should be the rights and responsibilities they would be in favor of including now. If any men are in the audience, they should write one contract that they expected of their wives when first married (or at age 18-20 if never married) and one that they would expect their wives to fulfill now.

   Then divide the women into groups of three to four each. They should discuss the two contracts and the major differences. Allow at least twenty minutes for this section because it may become somewhat animated. Be prepared for a few people who would prefer not to discuss their contracts with others--if so, do not push the issue.

   After they have discussed the contracts, have them make two or three generalizations about the differences between the old and new contracts. These should be discussed by the total group with each sub-group reporting.

   If this activity were used with various women's groups (some in inner city areas, some suburban, some upper middle class, some working class, and other socioeconomic, ethnically differentiated groups) it would be interesting to compare the results. You might ask the group to hypothesize about what they feel would result from another group performing the same activity.

-ACTIVITIES-

4. Develop a "Strong, Active Women" display using old photographs, diary excerpts, interviews, and anecdotes about your group's mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Collect brief (1-3 paragraphs) descriptions about the working class ethnic women in your group's background. These could be put in a scrapbook or typed on cards for a display presentation. Copies of diary pages and old photographs would add a great deal. Try to find stories about women who held a family together during adversity, worked at a job usually considered "too hard" for women, or organized some sort of neighborhood or city movement. If possible, have a local bank, insurance agency, or community building display your materials.

5. Have the women in your group develop three "I want" lists. There should be a personal "I want" list, an "I want" list for their family members, and a separate list for the neighborhood or community. Tell them that their personal list should not be too personal. It should include things like "I want to learn how to write magazine articles" or "I want to find a good, full-time job."

   The women should share their lists with groups of three to four participants each. They should note similarities among their lists. They should try to develop generalizations from the lists. For example, a generalization could be: "We all want to find better uses for our leisure time."

   Bring the sub-groups together again into the larger "group." Discuss the generalizations that were developed by the sub-groups and note the similarities among them. Then the group should try to find ways to link the neighborhood/community "wants" with the personal and family ones. For example, if one generalization was "I want my children to attend schools with more discipline," that's a family "want" that must be solved by working in the community. The goal of this activity is to help the participants realize that many personal and family "wants" require action outside the household if they are to be achieved.

6. This activity is directly related to the previous one. Using the list of personal, family, and neighborhood/community "wants," try to identify other women's groups in the Chicago area that would have similar "wants." For example, better schools or better employment opportunities for women are not the desires of just one group. (You might check with the staff of the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity to see if any other women's groups have used this activity and whether or not they would be willing to share their results with your group.)

   Once other groups are tentatively or actually identified, try to establish some "action plans" and cooperative activities. Use the community "wants" as a "bridge" to the other groups. Try to establish coalitions with one or more groups to achieve one of your common group goals. Once this is done, future cooperative efforts will be easier to initiate and even more likely to achieve success.